

2009

The effect of multiple perpetrators on judgements of responsibility

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THE EFFECT OF MULTIPLE PERPETRATORS ON JUDGEMENTS OF
RESPONSIBILITY

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Psychology

Eastern Michigan University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

General Experimental Psychology

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September 16, 2009

Ypsilanti, Michigan

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the production of this thesis including the members of my committee, Silvia von Kluge, Elliott Bonem, and Amy Young, and my family and friends who assisted and supported me throughout this process.

ABSTRACT

This study questioned whether participants feel one person committing a crime alone is more, less, or equally responsible for his or her actions than two people committing a crime together; whether participants react differently to two equally culpable co-conspirators than they do to a perpetrator who was coerced by a companion to commit the crime; and whether these factors affect the amount of responsibility attributed to the perpetrator or the length of sentence recommended. The study found that less responsibility was attributed to a coerced perpetrator; however, all perpetrators received sentences of similar lengths. Also, White respondents attributed more responsibility to the perpetrator than Black or “other” respondents, and females gave longer sentences than males. It appears that the differing circumstances of the perpetrators and the backgrounds of the respondents are more influential factors than the number of perpetrators. Possible implications of these findings, methodological improvements, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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Introduction

Over the past fifty years, a large amount of research has examined jury decision-making. Juries are an integral part of the justice system in the United States (Abramson, 1994), and a jury can have a substantial impact on the sentencing of a defendant. Every year more than 150,000 trials by jury take place in the United States, and hundreds of thousands of American citizens are selected to serve on juries (Landsman, 1999). Because juries are made up of everyday people, many researchers have been interested in the different factors that may influence their decision-making in a jury setting.

It is widely accepted that when humans process an event, they do not always take every little detail into account nor evaluate each detail individually. Instead they rely on stereotypes, schemas, and scripts to facilitate their internal processing, enabling them to make rapid decisions relating to a situation (Devine, Clayton, Dunford, Seying, & Pryce, 2001). The speed at which humans process events can lead them to develop wrong impressions, make hasty decisions, and, in the case of juries, produce wrongful convictions. As a result of these human tendencies in decision-making, a great deal of research has been done to examine the relationships, if any, between jurors' dependence on stereotypes and schemas and their sentencing decisions.

Factors that Influence Jury Decision-making

The research on the influence of various factors in jury decision-making is extensive but not entirely consistent. The fact that many studies contradict established findings may be due to the interplay of the psychological characteristics of the jurors and the influence of various other factors, such as the age of the defendant, the age of the juror, a similarity bias, the physical attractiveness and lifestyle of the defendant,

provocation, criminal record, and attribution of responsibility and causality. It is almost impossible for studies to isolate these factors and thus ascertain which are influential, or not, on jurors in any given situation.

Even ideological perceptions of jurors can alter the decisions reached by the group. For example, a study by Carroll, Perkowitz, Lurigio, and Weaver (1987) found that personality and moral ideology were closely related to punishment preferences. That is, a high level of moral conservativeness was linked with a strong belief in individual causation and stiff punishments whereas a preference for rehabilitation was more closely related to a less authoritarian style and doubt about the efficacy of prison and usefulness of harsh punishments. In another study people with authoritarian personalities were often found to be more inclined to give harsher sentences (Hagan, 1975), and attitudes held about “law and order,” or following laws to the letter, also influence the process used when evaluating a defendant. Those who place high importance on law and order tend to use only the information about the broken law when making decisions, but those less concerned with law and order tend to look at other factors, such as age, gender, race, and prior convictions when sentencing a defendant (Hagan, 1975). Individual personality is influential in jury decision-making, and the political and social attitudes of an outspoken juror could influence the rest of the jury, causing bias in the sentencing decision.

Age of the defendant and age of the juror.

Intuitively, one might expect that juries would be more lenient toward younger defendants. Yet a study by Warling and Peterson-Badali (2003) found that the assessment of guilt and verdicts reached were not affected by the defendant’s being thirteen, seventeen, or twenty-five; the length of sentence was, however, shorter for the thirteen-year-old defendant than for the other two. The age of the juror could also

be thought to influence decisions, but when Ackerman, McMahon, and Fehr (1984) compared the responses of nineteen-year-old jurors to those of thirteen-year-old jurors in a mock jury setting, they found that the older group attributed more responsibility to the defendant, but gave shorter sentences than the younger group. Thus, in the thirteen- to twenty-five-year age group, the sentence length can be influenced by the age of the defendant and the age of the juror. No clear conclusion can be drawn regarding the overall effect of age on jury decision-making, however, because in another study, using a larger range of ages, Sealy (1981) found that there was only a very slight difference between the actions of jurors of different ages. Sealy's findings also showed that jurors below twenty-five and above forty years old had a tendency to acquit the defendant.

Similarity bias.

A juror-defendant similarity bias is defined as the situation in which the juror shares a dominant characteristic, such as race or gender, with the defendant, and this similarity affects the juror's opinion. For example, male-dominated juries are more likely to award higher damages to males, and female juries are more likely to award higher damages to females (Nagel & Weitzman, 1972). Theoretically they do this because the similar gender causes a bias. The most consistent finding in this area is related to the race of the jurors and the defendant. In a case where the evidence was weak, White-majority juries were more likely to convict and were more punitive towards a Black defendant than Black-majority juries. When the evidence was strong, Black-majority juries were harsher to a Black defendant than White-majority juries (Chadee, 1996). In other ethnic groups, the number of Hispanic jurors on a jury was positively correlated with the sentence length given to a White defendant (Daudistel, Hosch, Holmes, & Graves, 1999). The juror-defendant similarity bias in regard to race

and gender is, therefore, useful to consider when interpreting data on jury decision-making.

Physical attractiveness and lifestyle.

Physical attractiveness does not appear to be a consistent influence on juries in establishing guilt or innocence (Devine et al., 2001), but social attractiveness does appear to be a factor. Nemeth and Sois (2000) conducted a study where they varied the social attractiveness of a man on trial for negligent homicide. Social attractiveness was defined as having held the same white-collar job for a number of years, having a friendly disposition, being widowed rather than divorced, spending Christmas with close family, and having received only traffic tickets with no criminal record. The socially unattractive character was employed for only two months in a blue-collar job, had no friends to speak of, was divorced twice, and planned to spend Christmas with his girlfriend rather than his children. The socially undesirable character also had a misdemeanor record of breaking and entering and drug trafficking, as well as several traffic tickets on his record. This study found that the attractive defendant was perceived to be more sorrowful after the crime and his drinking was considered less of a problem. He was awarded a significantly shorter sentence. Thus, social and lifestyle characteristics of a defendant can be influential in the assessment of guilt and distribution of punishment.

Provocation.

Victim provocation has been studied as a factor that affects the attitudes of jurors towards defendants and influences the decisions they make. In homicide cases, the charge can be mitigated in situations where the victim provoked the defendant sufficiently. Provocation is considered to be “sufficient” if the defendant committed the crime in passion; if the crime occurred after the provocation; and if there was a

causal connection between the provocation, the passion, and the crime (Miethe, 1984). Miethe's study investigated the effect that victim provocation had on the assessment of the responsibility of the defendant and plaintiff. As in the study that will be proposed below, the variables of interest were the level of responsibility assigned to the defendant and the number of years the participants felt the defendant deserved to serve in prison. Miethe found that victim provocation can be influential in jury decision-making. As the degree to which the victim provoked the defendant increases, the responsibility attributed to the victim increases, and the attributed responsibility and years in prison for the defendant decrease. This finding is worthy of note because it is important to know that a jury could give two different people different sentences for committing the same crime based on the provocation factor alone.

Criminal record.

Juries may also be influenced by the criminal history and background of the defendant. A study by Wissler and Saks (1985) found that in a scenario where the guilt or innocence of a defendant was ambiguous, the conviction rates were higher for defendants who had previously committed a crime of the same type and lower when there was no mention of a previous crime. Jurors felt the defendant was more likely to be guilty if he or she appeared to have repeated a previous crime. Even though the judge instructed the jury to disregard the criminal record, the instructions had little bearing on the way the jurors actually used their knowledge of previous convictions. In Wissler and Saks' study, the jury clearly did not ignore it the way that they were instructed. This finding would suggest that information about prior crimes should not be included if the jury is to evaluate a case on its own merits.

Likewise, the practice of joining crimes in a trial may be detrimental to the defendant's chances of acquittal or mitigated sentencing. "Joining crimes" means that the defendant is tried for more than one crime in the same trial. This usually happens when the crimes are similar or were committed in the same incident (Greene & Loftus, 1985). It is thought that the knowledge that the person possibly committed more than one crime produces an unfortunate "halo" effect that could cause jurors evaluating the situation to impute an increased number of negative traits to the defendant (Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972). Thus, based on these findings, those who are on trial for multiple crimes could be at a perceived disadvantage. Greene and Loftus investigated this possibility in 1985 using a mock jury trial where two crimes were presented alone or together and the proportion of guilty verdicts reached in each situation were measured. It was found that the defendants were more likely to be convicted of any charge if the charge was paired with a second charge in the trial. The authors termed this the "spillover effect," or the influence that a defendant's perceived criminal disposition has on the jury.

Previous acquittals do not appear to have the same biasing effect as previous convictions. Greene and Dodge (1995) found that, although evidence about a prior conviction increased the likelihood of a jury to convict, information about a previous acquittal did not significantly increase the likelihood of a conviction when compared to having no information about the defendant's prior record. Similarly a Supreme Court ruling stated that evidence that the defendant had been acquitted for a previous crime did not unfairly prejudice the jury and was admissible to show motive, intent, identity, or opportunity (*Dowling v. U.S.*, cited in Greene & Dodge, 1995). However, in this case, the defendant objected and claimed that his previous acquittal was being used to prove bad character, which is prejudicial, and, therefore, illegal. The evidence

of an acquittal, if the court agrees to include it, is only to be used to assess witness credibility, not to measure the probability of guilt (Wissler & Saks, 1985), but there is, of course, no guarantee that the jury will follow the instructions of the judge and use it in this way. Findings regarding previous convictions and acquittals are not, however, consistent across all studies. Clary and Shaffer (1980) did not find evidence to suggest that previous criminal record affects a jury's evaluations of guilt. They suggested that this result may have been because the criminal record information was confounded by other factors in their study, and they argued that it is possible that criminal record has a strong influence only under specific circumstances. Clary and Shaffer also found that jury perceptions were affected by the impression that the defendant was withholding information that could be pertinent to the case. Defendants who appeared to be open and answered questions honestly were less likely to be judged guilty than those who did not answer fully and were less straightforward. Clary and Shaffer felt the jurors assumed a relationship between the crime and the withheld information, which implied that the information, if revealed, would certify the guilt of the defendant.

Despite the influence of all these factors, the evidence presented in the trial is still extremely important in the jury decision-making process. Jurors perceive evidence in different ways, and the evidence clearly competes in some cases with the extralegal factors. Visher (1987) interviewed 331 jurors after they had served on a real trial jury and measured the influence of "evidence factors" compared to extralegal factors. They found that evidence variables were responsible for 34% of the variance, whereas victim and defendant characteristics and juror characteristics and attitudes accounted for only 8% and 2% of the variance, respectively. So, despite the influence

of extra-evidential factors in some studies, the actual evidence remains the most important consideration and has the largest influence on decisions made by jurors.

Attribution of responsibility and causality.

Another area of research that is pertinent to jury decisions is the work that investigates how people assign causes to events and how they measure the degree of an individual's responsibility for an event's occurrence. According to Shaver (1985), if something happens because of a person and there is no obvious alternative reason for the event, an observer will attribute causality to that person. At this point, cognitive processing ceases, because the cause has been identified. If the observer perceives that another factor may be the ultimate cause, cognitive processing continues to determine the cause, using a variety of methods, including asking the opinions of others. A person's goal is to find a *minimally sufficient causal subset*, or the simplest explanation for the event. If the event does not appear to have a single cause, all of the seemingly relevant elements will be included in the subset.

But how do observers choose what they feel to be relevant elements when constructing their minimally sufficient causal subsets? The subjectivity inherent in observing an event could, of course, lead one observer to feel that certain factors were more important than what another observer feels they were (Shaver, 1985), and this disparity is one of the problems jurors face when trying to make a decision.

The concept of responsibility is naturally essential to the legal system. One cannot be convicted for a crime if one is not perceived to be responsible for its occurrence, and many issues affect the attribution of responsibility. Responsibility is dependant on causality, but responsibility and causality are different (Shaver, 1985). Heider (1958) identifies two factors that are relevant when determining responsibility: the degree to which the actor caused or intended the event to happen and the influence

of environmental factors on the occurrence of the event. These factors led to the Heider's construction of five stages of responsibility. The levels, in increasing order, are: *association*, where a person is responsible for events connected to them in any way; *commission*, where a person is responsible for causing the event even if the outcome was unknown and could not be avoided; *foreseeability*, where the actor is responsible for the event which occurred as a by-product of the intended action; *intention*, where the actor was aware of the results of an action and deliberately carried it out; and *justification*, where the results of the actions of the actor are foreseeable, but some external, environmental force is also responsible, i.e. if the actor is coerced or forced. Using this theory, *intention responsibility* is considered to be full, criminal responsibility for an action (Hamilton, 1978). It is also thought that, when evaluating responsibility, actors are judged based on their actions (causality) and also on what they should have done according to laws or social norms (expectations). Thus social roles are significant in determining responsibility (Hamilton, 1978).

Heider's model incorporates responsibility for accidental as well as intentional acts and differentiates between the two, which are usually judged differently (McGraw, 1987). Distinctions have also been made between causal responsibility—where the actor is the cause of the event—and moral responsibility—where the actor is thought to deserve to be blamed for the outcome of the event (McGraw, 1987). This distinction is a critical factor in jury decision-making. A study by Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Bloom (2003) found that if an event was *causally deviant*, that is, the outcome was caused and desired by the actor, but did not occur in the intended way, the level of moral responsibility attributed to the actor was lower than if the outcome occurred as the actor had planned. For example, in one of the scenarios a man planned to kill

someone with a gun, but accidentally ran the person over with his car. The outcome was intended, i.e. the person died, but the death did not occur as planned and resulted in a lesser amount of moral responsibility being attributed to the defendant.

Moral responsibility is defined fairly subjectively, and its definition varies depending on the researcher. Legal responsibility is much more specific and is required in legal settings. The first requirement for legal responsibility is *actus reus*, which means the act was deliberate, occurred in specified circumstances, and had negative consequences. The second requirement is *mens rea*, which is carrying out the action in a criminal state of mind (Williams, 1953, cited in Shaver, 1985). Shaver (1985) presented five *dimensions of responsibility*, which are useful when assessing the level of legal responsibility that should be attributed to one for a particular act. The five dimensions are: *causal*, whether the actor was the reason for the event; *coercion*, whether the actor had a choice in his or her actions; *knowledge of the consequences*, where the actor was aware of the outcome; *intentionality*, if the actor wanted the event to happen; and *appreciation of the moral implications of the action*, whether the actor understood that the action was morally wrong. Using these dimensions, juries can attribute legal responsibility and more easily make judgments about punishment for crimes.

A variety of factors all contribute to the way juries make decisions, from the demographics of defendants and jurors, the characteristics of the crime and content of the trial, to the cognitive aspects of responsibility and causality attribution. Clearly many things can affect jury decision-making, but one area where research seems to be lacking is the effect of having more than one defendant who collaborated in the same crime. If a person commits a crime alone, it seems straightforward to attribute causality and responsibility to that person as the obvious reason for the event.

However, if a person committed the crime with a peer, the effect of their collaboration on the attribution of responsibility and sentence length is, as yet, unknown.

Current Research

Because so many factors influence the attitudes of the jury, it seems worthwhile to investigate the effect of multiple defendants. The aim of the current study is to explore the level of responsibility participants attribute to each of two perpetrators and how long they feel the perpetrator(s) deserve to spend in prison for the crime. The study will also examine how these ratings differ depending on the number of perpetrators and the relational circumstances under which the perpetrators committed the crime.

To elicit this information, a scenario in which two perpetrators commit a crime will be used. As studies cited above have shown, factors such as coercion influence the decisions of the jury; therefore, in order to investigate the multiple-defendants effect most fully, a scenario in which one perpetrator was coerced will be included. Finally, something as simple as the gender of the defendant can be influential (Nagel & Weitzman, 1972), so a scenario with one male and one female perpetrator will also be used. For comparison, of course, some participants will be given a scenario with a single perpetrator. The study is largely exploratory as no previous research has indicated whether attributions of responsibility or sentence length will be influenced by there being more than one perpetrator. It is possible that the participants will perceive that responsibility could be shared between the two perpetrators and therefore attribute less responsibility to each of them than to the single perpetrator. It is also possible that the two perpetrators would be given more responsibility than the single perpetrator, or exactly the same amount of responsibility. With these four

scenarios, the current study hopes that any differences in decisions made by the jury, based on the number of defendants and their characteristics, will be apparent.

Method

Participants

The participants were 204 undergraduates taking psychology classes at Eastern Michigan University. They were between 18 and 51 years old, with a mean age of 22. Of the sample, 37.4% were male, and 62.6 % were female. One participant declined to specify gender. The ethnic groups broke down to 67.6% White and 18.6% African American, with 9.8% choosing another ethnicity.

Measures

Scenarios.

Four conditions existed, consisting of stories where the same crime is committed, but by different combinations of people. In the first one, a male commits a crime alone; in the second, two males commit a crime together and their participation in the event appears to be equal; in the third, one male and one female, of equal participation, commit a crime together; and in the fourth scenario, two males commit a crime together, but one appears to have been coerced by the other. The participants were randomly assigned one of the four conditions. The first group contained fifty participants; the second, fifty participants; the third, forty-nine participants; and the fourth, fifty-five participants. The scenarios were each followed by a series of questions to assess the level of responsibility the participant would attribute to the perpetrators for his or her actions and the length of time the participant felt the perpetrators deserved to spend in prison. The participants rated the level of

responsibility by choosing any number between 0 and 100%, and chose the sentence length from nine possible choices, ranging from 0-6 months to 15+ years.

The scenarios were designed to resemble a newspaper article about a burglary in which the perpetrators were 24 years old, White, and male or female. Each of the perpetrators had previously been convicted of a similar crime. The value of the goods stolen in the current crime is given, as is the fact that the perpetrator(s) were caught red-handed leaving the property (see appendix A for surveys). In order to make the attribution of responsibility and selection of an appropriate sentence length easier for the participants, details such as the length of time the perpetrators spent in prison previously and average sentence length for burglary were also provided. Average sentence length was taken from the 2002 National Judicial Reporting Program from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (<http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/scscfst.ht-m>). Statistical analyses were conducted to compare the amount of responsibility attributed and sentence length given in each group.

Analyses.

Each of the four groups was first compared to the others using ANOVAs to investigate whether there was a difference in responsibility ratings depending on the condition. Then a Chi-Square test of Independence was applied to investigate differences between the attributed lengths of sentences depending on the condition the participant was assigned to. Of particular interest were any differences that might occur between the one-perpetrator group and the other three groups, as it was thought that the number of perpetrators in the stories were likely to generate different responses. ANOVAs and t-tests were also used to determine whether the differences in the responses depended on age, gender, and ethnicity because previous research has indicated that these factors can influence jury decisions in particular circumstances.

Factorial ANOVAs were used to investigate the differences between the responses of male and female participants to the different scenarios. Descriptive statistics were also computed to provide a complete picture of the sample and to aid discussion of any characteristics of the sample that may have affected the results.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through undergraduate psychology classes. The experimenter was granted permission by the instructor to recruit students in class. She gave the students a brief introduction and told them that the study was investigating attitudes towards crime and that it would take less than 10 minutes to complete. The participants were offered extra credit for their participation, but in accordance with APA guidelines, it was also made clear to the participants that they were under no obligation to participate in the study, and if they chose not to, they would suffer no negative repercussions and would be given a different opportunity to earn extra credit. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that their responses would be kept confidential and separate from any identifying information. The questionnaires were then distributed along with an informed consent to sign and more details regarding the study (see appendix B for informed consent).

After the questionnaires were completed, the informed consents were separated from the responses and placed in a locked filing cabinet. The responses to the study questions were numbered and recorded in a password-protected computer file. Data analysis was then run on the responses.

Results

There were four conditions in the current study: one perpetrator, two male perpetrators, male and female perpetrators, and coercion. They will be referred to as

1P, 2MP, M&FP, and C, respectively. 1P had one perpetrator, and the other three conditions each had two perpetrators. Each participant read one of four narratives about a robbery where the committers of the crime varied in either the number of perpetrators, gender of the perpetrators, or the relationship between the perpetrators, i.e. equal or coerced (see appendix A for complete stories). The participants were asked to rate from 1 to 100 the amount of responsibility the individuals in the stories should be given for their actions. They were also asked to estimate the length of sentence each perpetrator should receive by selecting one of nine choices from 0–6 months to 15+ years. The differences between group responses were examined, as well as the differences between the responses of participants who belonged to different ethnic groups. The differences between the responses of male and female participants were also investigated. The analyses were computed using a series of ANOVAS, Chi-Squares, factorial ANOVAs, and *t-tests*.

Responsibility Ratings of Perpetrator 1

The data were percentages from 0–100 and were analyzed using a one-way ANOVA to find differences between the four conditions when rating the amount of responsibility given to the first perpetrator. The participants rated the responsibility level (0–100% responsible) for either the single perpetrator (if assigned to 1P), one of the two, equally responsible male perpetrators (2MP), the male perpetrator in the male/female scenario (M&FP), or the coerced perpetrator (C). As Figure 1 illustrates, the mean responsibility ratings were 93.4%, 95%, 94.4%, and 83.9% respectively. The ANOVA indicated a significant difference in the amount of responsibility given, depending on which group the participant was in: $F(3,200) = 5.427$; $p < 0.01$.

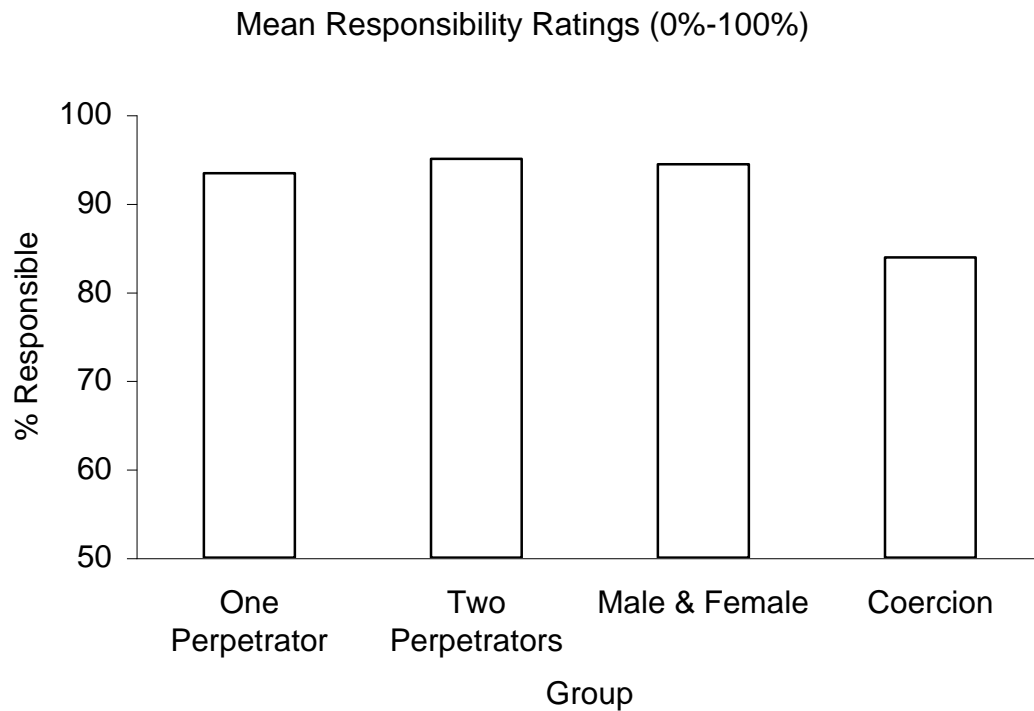


Figure 1: Mean responsibility ratings given to the first perpetrator by each group.

A Post-hoc Tukey test of multiple comparisons showed that the responsibility rating for perpetrator 1 in C was significantly lower than the responsibility ratings for perpetrator 1 in 1P, 2MP, and M&FP; $p < 0.05$ for the comparisons between the coercion group and all three other groups. However, there were no significant differences between the responsibility ratings in the other three groups.

Sentence Length Choices for Perpetrator 1

The data were the sentence lengths chosen by each participant. The participants chose one of nine options for length of sentence: 0–6 months, 6–12 months, 1–2 years, 2–3 years, 3–4 years, 4–5 years, 5–10 years, 10–15 years, and more than 15 years. A Chi-Square test of independence was used to determine whether differences between the stories read by the participants in the different groups

influenced the sentence length chosen for each perpetrator. Figure 2 shows the frequencies of responses for each of the four groups, and Figure 3 illustrates the means of these frequencies for each group. The mean sentence lengths given by the participants to perpetrator 1 in 1P, 2MP, M&FP, and C, were 5.34 years, 5.67 years, 5.49 years, and 4.69 years, respectively.

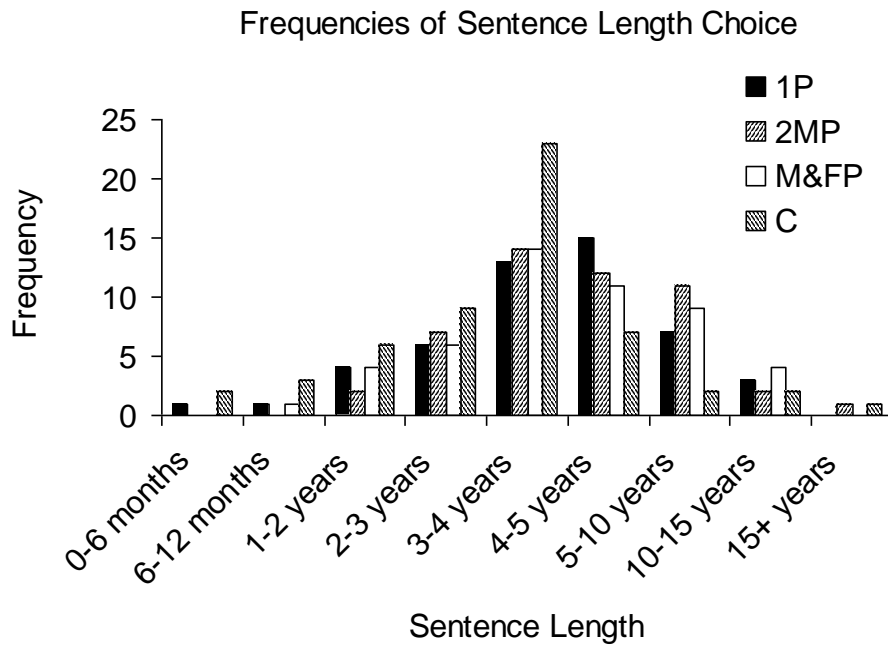


Figure 2: Frequencies of sentence length chosen for the first perpetrator by each group.

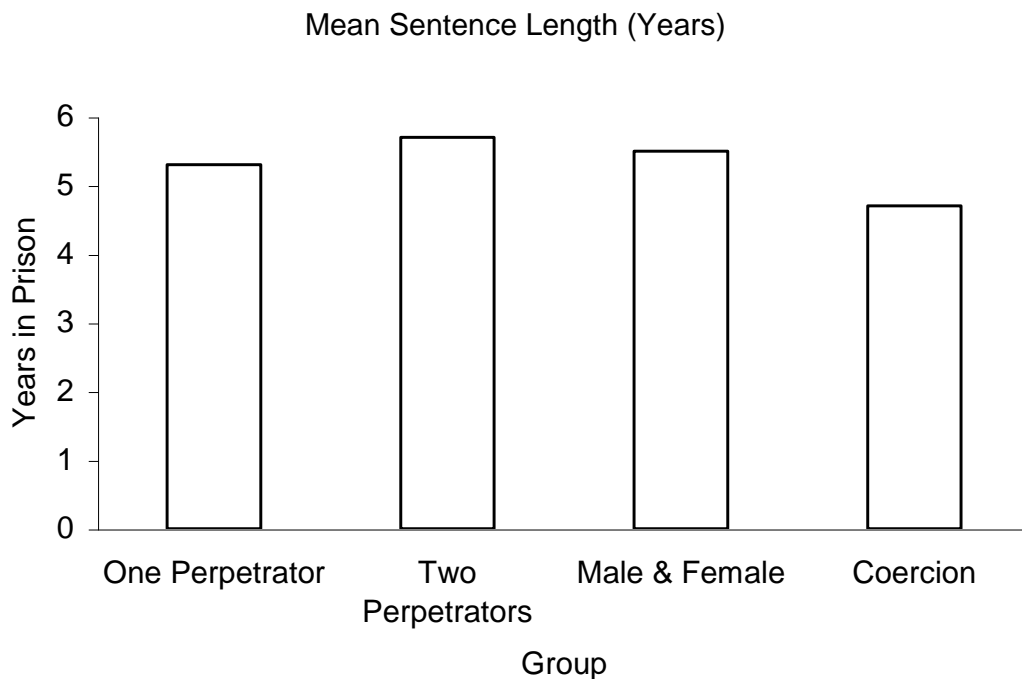


Figure 3: Mean number of years in prison given to the first perpetrator by each group.

The Chi-square showed that, although the mean sentence lengths chosen by each group differ, the differences were not significant: $\chi^2 = 25.235$; $df = 3$; $p > 0.05$.

Responsibility Ratings for Perpetrator 2

The data were percentages from 0–100. The participants were asked to rate the responsibility from 0–100% for the second person in each story: the second, equally responsible, male perpetrator in 2MP; the female perpetrator in M&FP; and the coercer in C. A one-way ANOVA was used to investigate any differences in the responses resulting from group assignment. Figure 4 shows that the mean responsibility ratings on a scale of 0% to 100% responsible for their actions were 94%, 94.5%, and 97.9% for 2MP, M&FP, and C, respectively.

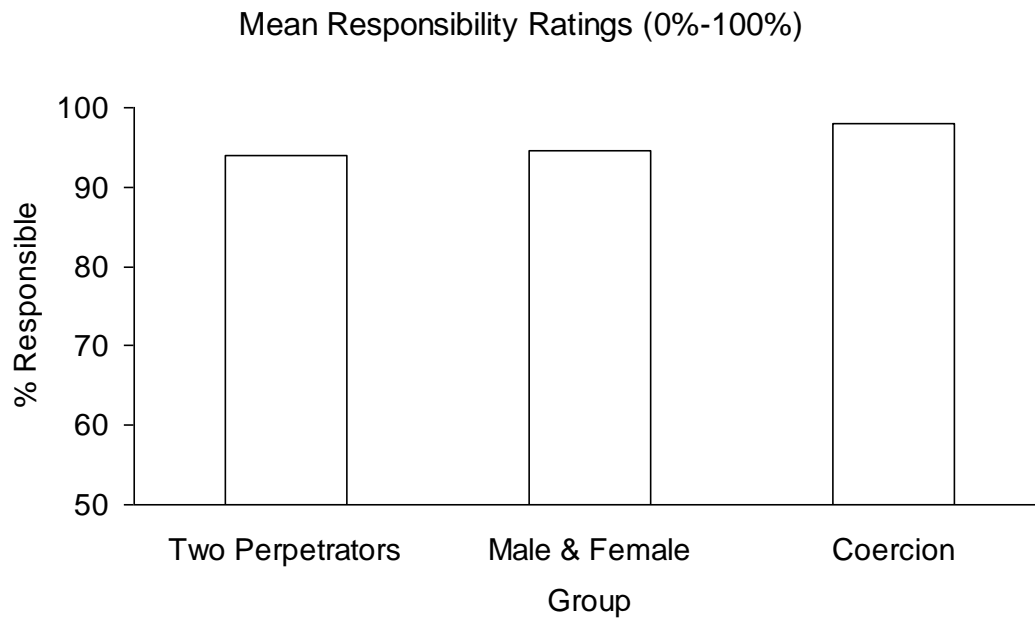


Figure 4: Means of ratings of responsibility given to the second perpetrator by each group.

Although the responsibility attributed to the coercer in the C group was slightly higher than the responsibility given to the perpetrators in groups 2MP and M&FP, a Post-hoc Tukey test of multiple comparisons showed that there were no significant differences between the levels of responsibility given to the second perpetrator in 2MP, M&FP, and C ($p > 0.05$).

Sentence Length Choices for Perpetrator 2

The data were the sentence lengths chosen by each participant. Participants chose one of nine sentence options: 0–6 months, 6–12 months, 1–2 years, 2–3 years, 3–4 years, 4–5 years, 5–10 years, 10–15 years, and more than 15 years. A Chi-Square test of independence was used to determine whether there was a relationship between the sentence length given to the second perpetrator and the group the participant was assigned to. Figure 5 shows the frequencies of sentence length chosen by each group, and Figure 6 illustrates the means of these frequencies, showing that the number of

years in prison given to the second perpetrator by participants in 2MP, M&FP, and C were 5.65, 5.49, and 5.56, respectively.

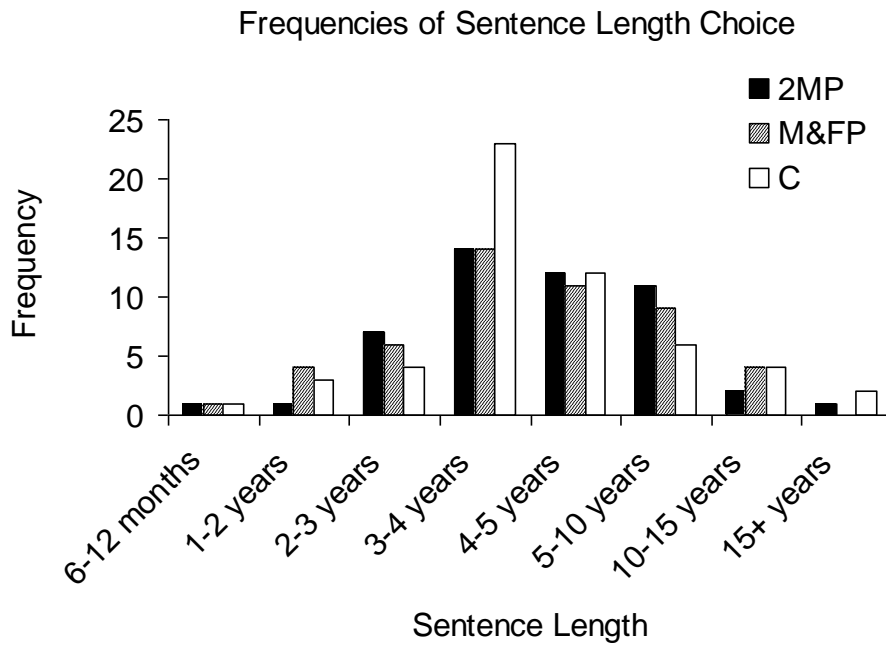


Figure 5: Frequencies of sentence length chosen for the second perpetrator by each group.

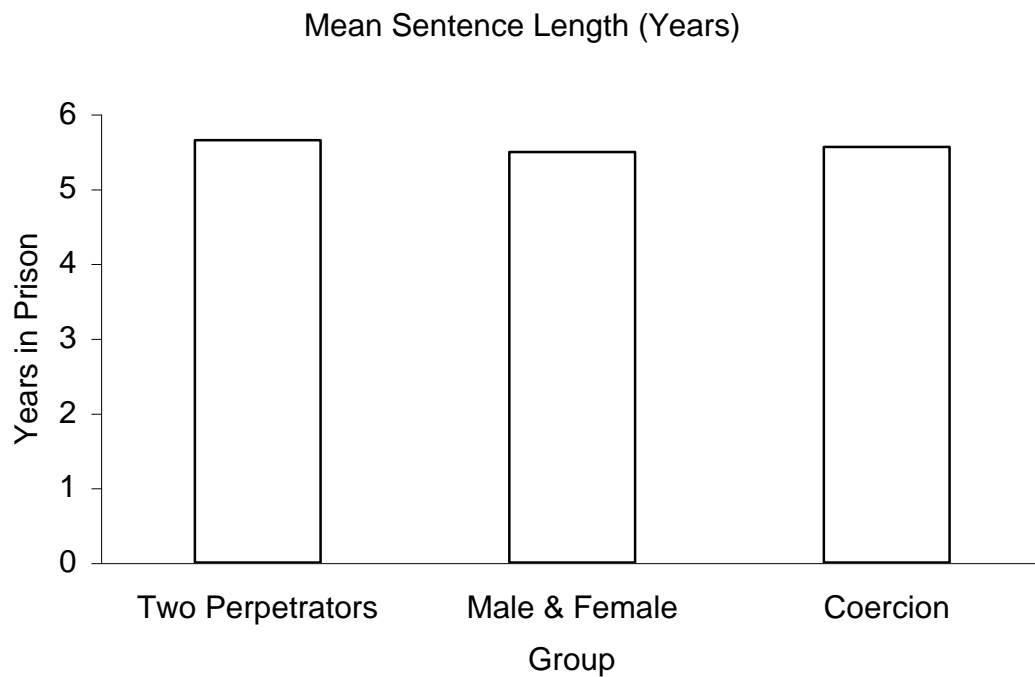


Figure 6: Mean number of years in prison given to the second perpetrator.

The Chi-Square indicated that there were no significant differences between the length of sentence given by the different groups, and no group was likely to give a longer or shorter sentence than another group ($\chi^2 = 9.502$; $df = 2$; $p > 0.05$).

Responsibility and Sentence Length Choice of Male and Female Participants

Responsibility and sentence length given to perpetrator 1.

Analyses were then computed to investigate whether males and females responded differently to the scenarios. An independent samples t-test revealed that the mean level of responsibility given to the first perpetrator by males was 89.3% and by females was 92.9%, but this difference was not significant ($p > 0.05$). A second independent samples t-test showed that the mean sentence length given to the first perpetrator by males was 5 years and by females was 5.45 years ($t(201) = 2.06$; $p < 0.05$). As Figure 7 indicates, females gave significantly longer sentences to the first perpetrator than males.

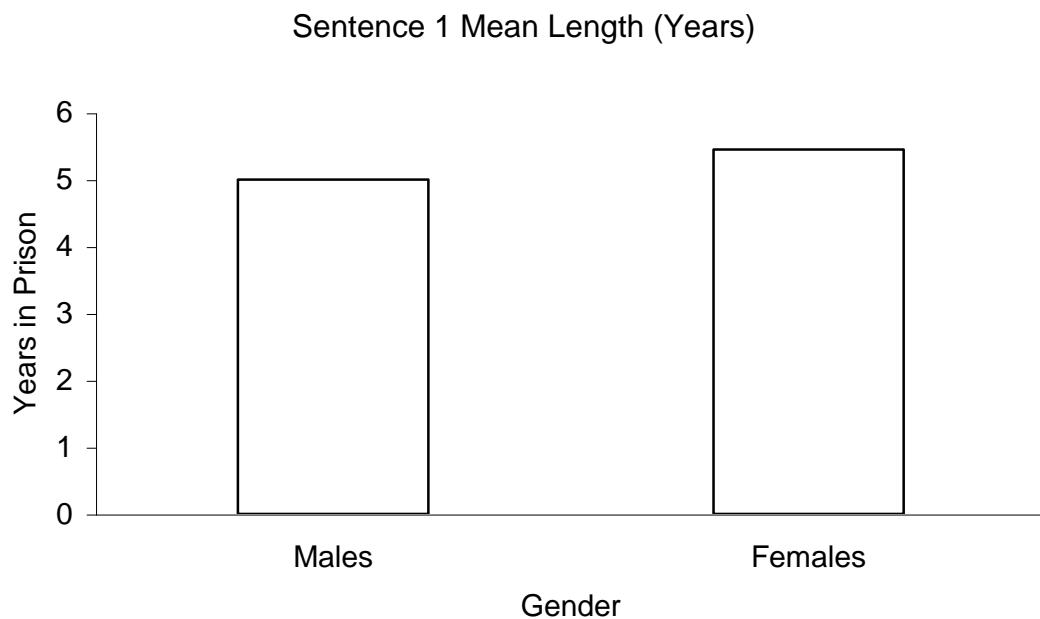


Figure 7: Mean sentence length given to first perpetrator by males and females.

Responsibility and sentence length given to perpetrator 2.

The differences between the responses of males and females to the second perpetrator were then examined. The mean responsibility ratings given by males and females to the second perpetrator were 95.9% and 95.6%, respectively. An independent samples t-test showed that this difference was non-significant ($p > 0.05$). Finally, an independent samples t-test was computed to calculate the difference between the mean sentence length given to the second perpetrator by males (5.21 years) and females (5.79 years). In this case there was a significant difference between the length of sentence given depending on the participant's gender: $t(151) = 2.52$; $p < 0.05$. Figure 8 shows that females gave the second perpetrator a significantly longer sentence than males.

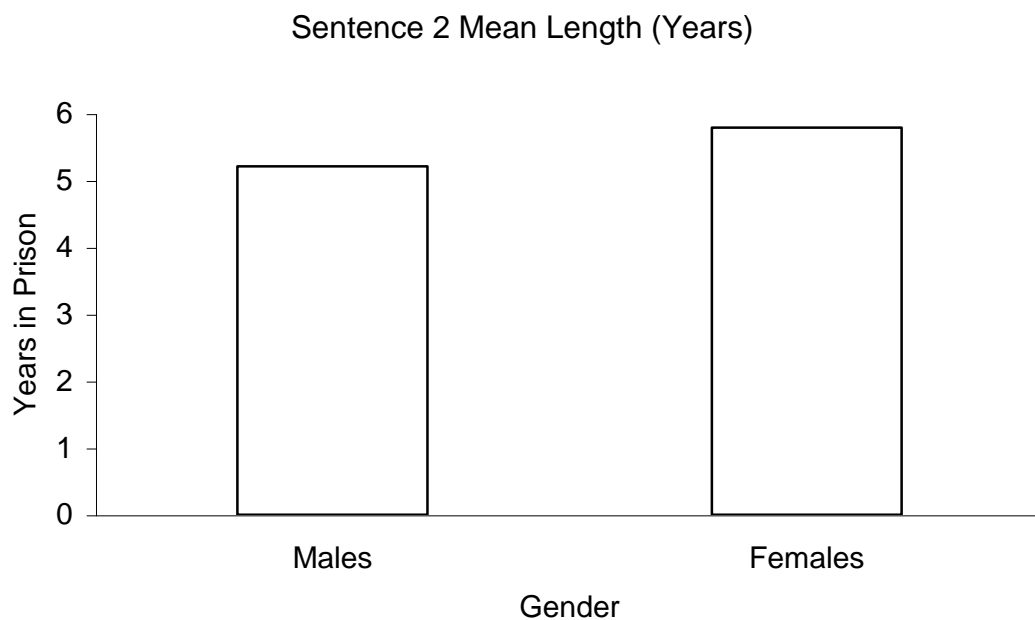


Figure 8: Mean sentence length given to second perpetrator by males and females.

Given that there was a significant difference between the responses of males and females when deciding on sentence length for both perpetrators, factorial ANOVAs were used to determine whether there was an interaction between the gender of the participant and the group they were assigned to, i.e., whether participants responded differently to each scenario depending on their gender. It was found, however, that there were no interactions between the gender of the participant and the group they were assigned to when choosing a degree of responsibility or a sentence length for the perpetrator.

Responsibility and Sentence Length Choice for Different Ethnic Groups

Responsibility and sentence length given to perpetrator 1.

The final analyses were a series of one-way ANOVAs to investigate differences in responses depending on the ethnic group of the participant. It was found that there were significant differences in the amount of responsibility given to the first perpetrators depending on whether the participant was White, Black, or belonged to another ethnic group: $F(2,193) = 13.226$, $p < 0.001$. The mean levels of responsibility given by White, Black, and “other” participants were 95.3%, 83.8%, and 80.5%, respectively (see Figure 9).

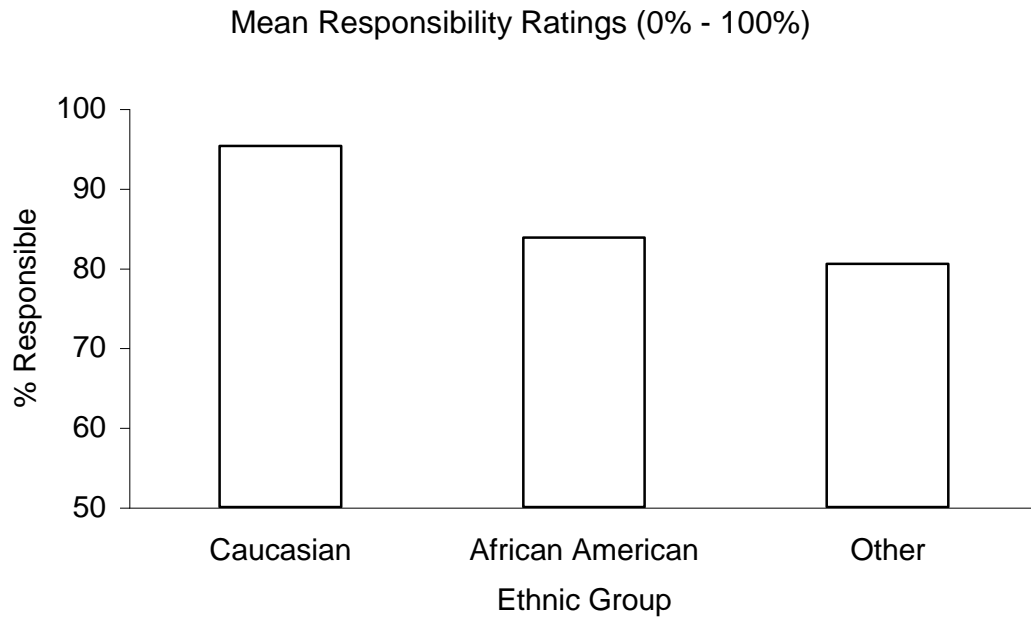


Figure 9: Mean responsibility ratings given to first perpetrator by each ethnic grouping.

Post-hoc Tukey tests of Multiple Comparisons showed that the White group attributed significantly more responsibility to the perpetrator than either the Black group or the “other” group, whose responses did not significantly differ from each other. The ANOVA also showed that there were no significant differences between the groups when assigning a sentence to the first perpetrator.

Responsibility and sentence length given to perpetrator 2.

A second one-way ANOVA was used to investigate differences in attributing responsibility to and sentencing the second perpetrator. In this case, when attributing responsibility, the White group gave significantly more responsibility to the perpetrator than the Black group. The mean responsibility ratings by the White, Black, and “other” group were 98.1%, 91.3%, and 91.8% respectively, (see Figure 10).

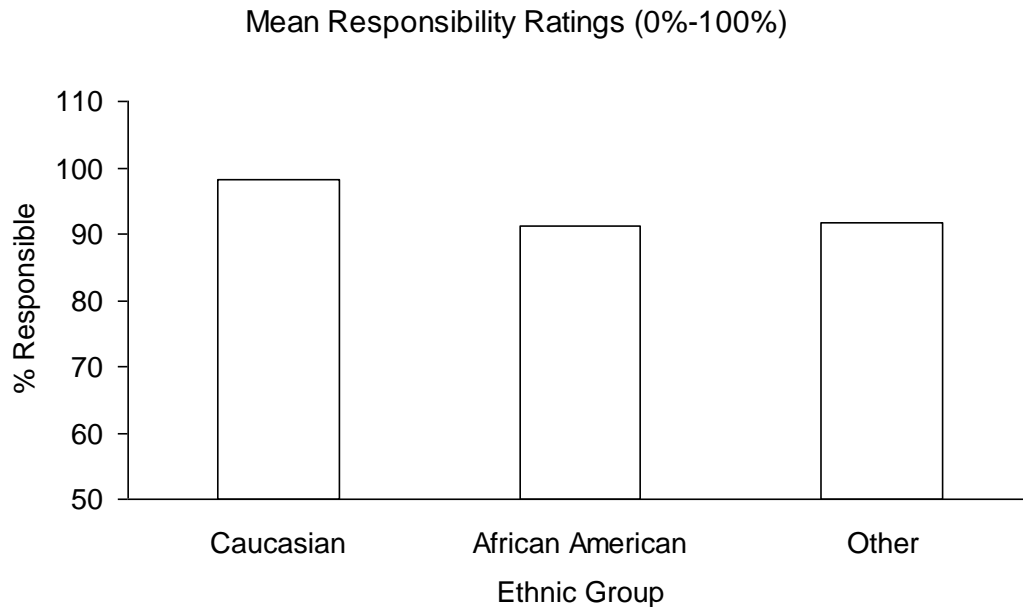


Figure 10: Mean responsibility ratings given to second perpetrator by each ethnic grouping.

Post-hoc Tukey tests of Multiple Comparisons showed that the responses of the White group significantly differed from only the Black group: $F(2,146) = 5.420$; $p < 0.05$. The responses of the “other” group did not differ significantly from those of the White or Black group. There were no significant differences between the groups when assigning a sentence to the perpetrators.

Discussion

This was a largely exploratory study intended to investigate any differences that may occur due to variations in the combination of perpetrators committing a crime. Four scenarios were used to highlight differences in the reactions of people when they were asked to make judgments about the perpetrators. The scenarios differed in number of perpetrators, gender of the perpetrators, and the relationships between the perpetrators, whether as equal or unequal conspirators.

Perpetrator 1

First, the participants rated the responsibility of the first perpetrator in each story and chose one of nine sentence lengths for him to serve for his crime (from 0–6 months to more than 15 years). In story one (1P) the first perpetrator was the only perpetrator; in story two (2MP) the first was one of the two, equally responsible perpetrators; in story three (M&FP) the first perpetrator was male; and in story four (C), the first perpetrator was the one who was coerced into committing the crime.

The only notable finding was that the perpetrator who was coerced in C was assigned significantly less responsibility for his actions than the first perpetrators in the other three scenarios, 1P, 2MP, and M&FP. There were no significant differences between the responsibility assigned to the first perpetrators in any of the other three groups. The first perpetrator in C was also given a shorter sentence, but this difference was not significant, nor were there any significant differences between the sentence lengths given to the first perpetrators in 2MP, M&FP, and C.

This finding is intriguing for a number of reasons. First, it is apparent that a single perpetrator is not treated differently from two perpetrators of the same crime. The single perpetrator in 1P was not held any more or less responsible for his actions or given a longer or shorter sentence than either of the other first perpetrators in the two non-coercion scenarios (2MP and M&FP). One of the effects the current study was designed to investigate was whether two equally responsible perpetrators committing a crime together would each be given a shorter sentence than a single perpetrator, in other words, if the participants would feel it was appropriate to “share” the punishment between them. The findings, however, do not indicate that this happened. The single perpetrator and perpetrator 1 in 2MP and M&FP were all given sentences almost identical in length.

This finding is also interesting because the coerced perpetrator in the fourth scenario (C) was assigned significantly less responsibility for his actions than the perpetrators in 1P, 2MP, or M&FP. This difference in responsibility ratings is consistent with Heider's 1958 theory that two factors are considered when determining responsibility—whether the actor caused the event to happen and the degree of influence environmental factors had on the event. The fifth stage of Heider's five stages of responsibility is *justification*, where an external, environmental force such as coercion is seen to be influencing the outcome of the event. Participants apparently felt that coercion was a mitigating factor.

In the first three scenarios, the burglary is presented as a choice that the perpetrators are making. There is no obvious external factor influencing them to steal from the homeowner; they are using free will to cause the events to happen. However, comments gathered from the participants indicated that most participants assumed there was some motivating factor behind their actions, such as poverty, and this caused the participants to feel that, although the perpetrator(s) were not 100% responsible, they were still in control of their actions and caused the event. On the other hand, in the fourth scenario, a clear external force is shown to be influencing perpetrator one to the degree that he is no longer acting of his own free will, but is instead being coerced by the other perpetrator to help him in break into the house. It seems likely that this is the reason that the participants rated the coerced perpetrator in C as significantly less responsible for his actions than the first perpetrators in 1P, 2MP, and M&FP.

It must be noted that the participants did not give the coerced perpetrator a significantly shorter sentence than the other three perpetrators. Although the coerced perpetrator was judged to be less responsible, he was still rated as partially

responsible for his actions, and it seems that the participants felt that a sentence of approximately the same length as that given to others for the same crime was appropriate.

Perpetrator 2

The responses of the participants to the second perpetrator in the two-person scenarios, 2MP, M&FP, and C, were also examined. (1P only had one perpetrator so the participants assigned to this condition were not required to rate a second perpetrator.) In 2MP both perpetrators were male and were portrayed as equally responsible. In M&FP, the first perpetrator was male, the second was female, and both were portrayed as equally responsible. In C, the first perpetrator was coerced, and the second perpetrator was the coercer. The differences between the responses of the participants to the second perpetrators are worthy of note.

The data indicate that more responsibility was given to the second perpetrator in C, the one who coerced his friend to commit the crime, than to the second perpetrators in 2MP and M&FP who did not coerce anyone (97.9% responsible compared to 94% and 94.4% for 2MP and M&FP respectively), but, even so, this difference was not significant.

Participant comments gathered during the study gave some insight into the reasons why the participants gave particular responsibility ratings. It can be inferred from these opinions that, when a crime is committed and the perpetrator is responsible for only his own actions, leniency is possible, based on extenuating factors, such as poverty, that may have influenced him in some way. But if a perpetrator becomes responsible not only for his own actions, but also causes someone else to be responsible for a crime, participants are less willing to take the perpetrator's personal problems into consideration. It appears that coercing someone else to commit a crime

did affect the opinion of the participants, and a future study which focuses primarily on the effects of coercion would be useful to explore this difference more fully.

Although responsibility ratings were different depending on the scenario, the sentence lengths assigned to the perpetrators 2MP, M&FP, and C did not differ significantly, and almost identical sentences were given to all of the second perpetrators.

That the participants chose to differentiate between responsibility and sentence length bears further examination. There seems to be a difference in the way participants respond when asked the two main questions of the current study—to rate responsibility and to assign sentence length. Responsibility ratings were different depending on the scenario, but the sentence length was almost identical for all perpetrators and close to the 5-year average that was included as background information. It appears that participants were more willing to make a moral judgment attributing responsibility, possibly because judging responsibility is something that people are familiar with and actually do on a regular basis. In addition, making a moral judgment of this sort has no real negative consequences for the perpetrator as the participant is only expressing a personal feeling. However, when the participants were asked to put themselves into a jury setting and choose a suitable sentence length for the perpetrator, the participants' opinions of whether they initially felt that the perpetrators were more or less responsible for their actions did not appear to influence their choice of sentence length. It is possible that because the participants are not familiar with deciding how long a person should spend in jail, they might not be comfortable making a decision that would negatively impact someone else's life. This discomfort may have caused them to disregard personal feelings about the perpetrators' different circumstances and opt for the safe answer—assigning the

average length of sentence for this crime. Both their own unfamiliarity with the legal process and the “real-life” consequences of the second question could have led the participants to base their decision largely on information presented in the study. This response stands in contrast to the answers to the first question which may have been influenced by the emotional reaction of the participants, partly because giving an opinion about how individual responsibility is familiar and partly because advancing a personal opinion about responsibility does not result in the individual’s spending time in jail.

Differences in Responses of Males and Females

The mean levels of responsibility and of sentence length given by males and females to the first perpetrator were examined, and although there were no significant differences in the amount of responsibility attributed (89.3% by males and 92.9% by females), the mean sentence length chosen by females was significantly longer than that chosen by males (5.45 years and 5 years respectively). This finding was repeated when responses to the second perpetrator were analyzed; there was no significant difference in responsibility ratings, but females gave a longer sentence length than males (5.79 years and 5.21 years, respectively).

The factorial ANOVAs used to determine whether there was an interaction between the participant’s assigned group and the gender of the participant did not yield significant results. It can be seen from previous analyses that differences did result, depending on which group the participant was assigned to, and that the differences in some responses depended on the gender of the participant, but there was not an interaction between these factors. That is, the responses of the participants to each group were not different due to the gender of the participant.

The finding that males and females sometimes differed in their responses is interesting when considered alongside the juror-defendant similarity bias. Nagel and Weitzman (1972) found that male-dominated juries had a tendency to award higher damages to male plaintiffs, and female-dominated juries were likely to award higher damages to a female plaintiff. Thus, it could be that when punishing someone for a crime, the opposite effect happens. Just as females are biased *towards* a female who is perceived to need help, they are biased *against* a male who requires some form of punishment. Further study would be very useful in investigating this effect more fully because there may be a completely different reason for females to give longer sentences than males. The content of the stories may have elicited a stronger emotional reaction in the female participants than in the males, or biases in the sample may have caused them to give longer sentence lengths.

Differences Between Ethnic Groups

Participants were asked to indicate the ethnic group they belonged to. In order to ensure that the numbers in each ethnic group would be large enough to make statistical analysis meaningful, the responses of the participants were categorized as White, Black, and "Other." Of the respondents, 67% chose White, 18.6% chose Black, and 9.8% chose a different ethnicity. Analysis found significant differences in the mean amount of responsibility given to the first perpetrators depending on the participant's ethnic group. White participants gave an average responsibility rating of 95%, which was significantly higher than that of the Black group or the "other" group (83.8% and 80.5% responsible, respectively). The Black group and "other" group did not differ significantly from each other. There were no significant differences between the length of sentence assigned to the first perpetrator depending on ethnic group.

When analyzing the responses to the second perpetrator, the White group gave significantly more responsibility to the perpetrator than the Black group did (98.1% and 91.3% responsible, respectively), but there were no significant differences between the responses of the White group when compared to the “other” group, or between the Black group and the “other” group. There were also no significant differences between the different ethnic groups when assigning sentence length.

Whites clearly had a stronger tendency to assign more responsibility to the first perpetrators than did the other two groups. This finding supports previous studies where it was found that a jury-defendant similarity bias influences the reactions of jurors to a defendant and causes them to be more punitive. A study by Chadee (1996) found that when the evidence of guilt was strong, juries on which the majority of jurors were Black were harsher to a Black defendant than a White-majority jury was. In the current study all of the perpetrators were White, the evidence of guilt was strong, and the White participants assigned more responsibility to the perpetrators than did the Black or “other” participants. When the defendant’s ethnicity was the same as the participant’s, the defendant was assigned significantly more responsibility for his or her actions.

Conclusions

This study was intended to explore what happens in regard to individual responsibility and sentencing when more than one perpetrator commits a crime and when the crime is committed under different circumstances. It was found that the relationship between the perpetrators of the crime changed the amount of responsibility the participants ascribed to each perpetrator, e.g. being coerced caused that perpetrator to be held less responsible. It was also found that having more than one perpetrator or having one perpetrator who was coerced into committing the crime

did not lead the participants to assign a shorter or longer sentence under either circumstance. This finding is useful as it indicates that jurors are not likely to be biased either positively or negatively towards perpetrators who break into houses in pairs when compared to solo housebreakers. Although the defense of “he made me do it” may cause the jury to feel that the coerced perpetrator is less responsible, they still feel that he or she deserves to be punished for the crime in the same way as others are punished.

This study was also useful as it provided support for the juror-defendant similarity bias identified by Chadee’s 1996 study, which found that jurors are more punitive towards others who belong to the same ethnic group as themselves, provided that the evidence of guilt is strong. All of the perpetrators presented in the scenarios were White, and the White participants assigned greater responsibility to the defendants than the other ethnic groups in this study. The current study also found that females are more punitive than males when assigning sentence length, which is an interesting extension of the concept that females award higher damages to female plaintiffs (Nagel & Weitzmann, 1972).

Limitations and Future Research

Because jury decision-making research investigates the responses of people (in the role of jurors) to other people (in the roles of plaintiffs and defendants), having a research sample that is representative of the population at large produces findings that are more likely to be useful when making generalizations about behavior tendencies. The current findings are based on a limited sample, the size of which could have influenced the results. Juries are made up of people of all ages from all walks of life, while this sample consisted entirely of psychology undergraduates, the majority of whom were White, two factors which could have resulted in biased

responses. A sample consisting of people who work in a variety of professions who come from a wide range of ethnic groups, incomes, and ages would be likely to yield results that would be more relevant to real-life jury behavior.

The study resulted in two unexpected findings. Participants appeared to be more willing to make judgments of responsibility than of sentence length, resulting in significant differences between responsibility ratings, but not in sentence length. The reason for this disparity was not entirely clear. Future research into why this difference occurred would be useful. The other particularly interesting finding was the fact that females were more punitive towards the perpetrators than males. Since the jury-defendant similarity bias has been found to be influential in the way juries make decisions, future study to investigate this aspect of the juror-defendant similarity bias is an important next step. It is essential to investigate all the ways juries can be biased towards or against a defendant in order to create a justice system that is as fair and unbiased as possible.

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Appendices

Appendix A.

Scenarios

Scenario 1P

Tuesday, December 20th. Excerpt from the *Midwest Tribune*.

The man thought to be responsible for a series of break-ins in the Ann Arbor area was apprehended yesterday afternoon. Steve Johnson, a 24 year old white man, was recently released from prison after being convicted for committing burglaries of a similar type. The recent burglaries were identical to his previous crimes in both method of entry and the area the crimes were centered in, but this time the suspect stole not only jewelry and electronic items, but also Christmas gifts from under the tree. Police were called to the scene after a neighbor noticed that a window in the rear of the house was broken and Johnson was caught as he attempted to leave the property carrying gifts addressed to the homeowner's children. Police reported that the stolen goods had a value of \$10,000 and that the perpetrator will stand trial later this month.

Please read the following information and then answer the questions below.

- The average sentence for burglary is 4 years in prison
- Typically, offenders in prison for burglary serve about 50% of their sentence (2 years).

1. How responsible do you think Johnson is for his actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

2. What is the length of sentence you would give to Johnson for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years

Please make any comments you have about your answers in the space below:

Please answer these questions about yourself.

1. Age: _____

2. Sex: Male Female

3. Ethnicity: _____

Thank you for your participation.

Scenario 2MP

Tuesday, December 20th. Excerpt from the *Midwest Tribune*.

The men thought to be responsible for a series of break-ins in the Ann Arbor area were apprehended yesterday afternoon. Steve Johnson, and Mark Adams, both 24 year old white men, were recently released from prison after being convicted for committing burglaries of a similar type. The recent burglaries were identical to their previous crimes in both method of entry and the area the crimes were centered in, but this time the suspects stole not only jewelry and electronic items, but also Christmas gifts from under the tree. Police were called to the scene after a neighbor noticed that a window in the rear of the house was broken and Johnson and Adams were caught as they attempted to leave the property carrying gifts addressed to the homeowner's children. Police reported that the stolen goods had a value of \$10,000 and that the perpetrators will stand trial later this month.

Please read the following information and then answer the questions below.

- The average sentence for burglary is 4 years in prison.
- Typically, offenders in prison for burglary serve about 50% of their sentence (2 years).

1. How responsible do you think Johnson is for his actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

2. How responsible do you think Adams is for his actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

3. What is the length of sentence you would give to Johnson for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years.

4. What is the length of sentence you would give to Adams for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years

Please make any comments you have about your answers in the space below:

Please answer these questions about yourself.

4. Age: _____

5. Sex: Male Female

6. Ethnicity: _____

Thank you for your participation.

Scenario M&FP

Tuesday, December 20th. Excerpt from the *Midwest Tribune*.

The couple thought to be responsible for a series of break-ins in the Ann Arbor area were apprehended yesterday afternoon. Steve Johnson and Laura Adams, both white 24 year olds, were recently released from prison after being convicted for committing burglaries of a similar type. The recent burglaries were identical to their previous crimes in both method of entry and the area the crimes were centered in, but this time the suspects stole not only jewelry and electronic items, but also Christmas gifts from under the tree. Police were called to the scene after a neighbor noticed that a window in the rear of the house was broken and Johnson and Adams were caught as they attempted to leave the property carrying gifts addressed to the homeowner's children. Police reported that the stolen goods had a value of \$10,000 and that the perpetrators will stand trial later this month.

Please read the following information and then answer the questions below.

- The average sentence for burglary is 4 years in prison.
- Typically, offenders in prison for burglary serve about 50% of their sentence (2 years).

5. How responsible do you think Johnson is for his actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

6. How responsible do you think Adams is for her actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

7. What is the length of sentence you would give to Johnson for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years.

8. What is the length of sentence you would give to Adams for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years

Please make any comments you have about your answers in the space below:

Please answer these questions about yourself.

7. Age: _____

8. Sex: Male Female

9. Ethnicity: _____

Thank you for your participation.

Scenario C

Tuesday, December 20th. Excerpt from the *Midwest Tribune*.

The men thought to be responsible for a series of break-ins in the Ann Arbor area were apprehended yesterday afternoon. Steve Johnson, and Mark Adams, both 24 year old white men, were recently released from prison after being convicted for committing burglaries of a similar type. The recent burglaries were identical to their previous crimes in both method of entry and the area the crimes were centered in, but this time the suspects stole not only jewelry and electronic items, but also Christmas gifts from under the tree. Police were called to the scene after a neighbor noticed that a window in the rear of the house was broken and Johnson and Adams were caught as they attempted to leave the property carrying gifts addressed to the homeowner's children. Johnson was overheard by witnesses saying, "It was all his idea, he said he'd kill me if I didn't help him, he's crazy." Police reported that the stolen goods had a value of \$10,000 and that the perpetrators will stand trial later this month.

Please read the following information and then answer the questions below.

- The average sentence for burglary is 4 years in prison.
- Typically, offenders in prison for burglary serve about 50% of their sentence (2 years).
- Adams threatened Johnson in order to convince him to assist in robbing the house.

9. How responsible do you think Johnson is for his actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

10. How responsible do you think Adams is for his actions? Please indicate a value between 0% and 100% responsible.

11. What is the length of sentence you would give to Johnson for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years.

12. What is the length of sentence you would give to Adams for this crime?

0-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, 2-3 years, 3-4 years,

4-5 years, 5-10 years, 10-15 years, More than 15 years

Please make any comments you have about your answers in the space below:

Please answer these questions about yourself.

10. Age: _____

11. Sex: Male Female

12. Ethnicity _____

Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Thank-you for volunteering to participate in this study. Before we continue, please read this document carefully, and sign at the end.

This study will consist of a short story and then a series of questions. You should read the story and then answer the questions as fully and honestly as you can. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, we only wish to know what your opinions are.

You are free to withdraw at any time from this study, and do not need to provide a reason for your withdrawal.

Any information that you give will be held in the strictest confidence and your responses will be kept separate from your identifying information. All information will be kept in a locked file in the locked office of the Principal Investigator or in a password protected computer file.

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

If you have any questions or concerns following your participation in this study, please email Louise Hamer for more information.

It is my right to withdraw at any time from completion of the study without penalty. I have read all of the above information regarding this study. The procedures and requirements have been explained to me, and I understand them. I freely and voluntarily consent to be a participant. For my records, I have been provided with a copy of this consent form.

Print Name

Sign Here

Appendix C

Use of Human Subjects Approval Letter

Psych Dept HSRC Committee Action Form
Updated 3/6/03-KKSEastern Michigan University
Psychology Department Human Subjects Research Review Committee
Committee ActionTitle of Proposal: The effect of Multiple Defendants on Attribution of ResponsibilityPrincipal Investigator: J Louise HamerFaculty Sponsor: Dr. Silvia von KlugeDate Submitted: 1/13/06 New Renewal Modification

Committee Action:

Approved Provisionally Approved Disapproved Exempt

Reason(s), if disapproved: n/a

Reason(s) if provisionally approved: n/a

Comments: This application was approved by the two assigned reviewers, subsequent to your making the adjustments that were requested. You are approved to begin data collection, using the Consent Form emailed to me on 1/24/06. . Good luck with your research!

Substitute or additional Committee members: _____

Signature for the Committee: Karen K. SaulesDate: 1/24/06

Note:

1. Investigators are obligated to advise the Review Committee of any change in protocol which might bring into question the involvement of human subjects in a manner at variance with the considerations on which the prior approval was based.
2. For ongoing studies, every 12 months from the date of this approval -- or at shorter intervals when specified by the Committee -- the investigator must submit the protocol and a progress report to the Committee for re-review.
3. Investigators are required to immediately suspend any study in which he/she observes an unanticipated negative change in the health or behavior of a subject that may be attributable to the research. The investigator must report the circumstances promptly to the Review Committee for its further review and decision on continuation or termination of the project.

